

Summary

Consolidation Task Force for Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind

Task Force Meeting

August 27, 2003

Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind – Staunton

Present: Martha Adams (for Julie Stanley), Nancy Armstrong, Mary-Margaret Cash, Doug Cox (for Jo Lynne DeMary), Scott Goodman (chair), Emmett Hanger, Jr., Ron Lanier, Henry Maxwell, Glen Slonneger, Lisa Surber, Darlene White, and David Young.

DOE staff: Karen Trump.

Facilitators: Judy Burtner and Kathryn Burruss.

Statement of Purpose:

Develop a plan of implementation for consolidating services for the deaf and/or blind and multi-disabled students served by Virginia's two schools for these students.

Session objectives:

1. Receive public comment
2. Receive and discuss background information and data
3. Receive update on public involvement activities: Web mailbox, focus groups
4. Decide on the criteria for decision-making
5. Firm up list of options
6. Narrow list of options using criteria
7. Receive the report format

Tour of Facilities

A tour of the Virginia School For the Deaf and/or Blind preceded the beginning of the Task Force meeting. In addition, a video of student activities and additional review of facilities was shown during lunch. Copies of the video (in the form of a CD) were made available to Task Force members.

Public Comment

Twenty-two individuals spoke during one of the three public comment periods: Rachel Bavister, Race Drake, Virgil Cook, Robin Gilbert, Don Cox, J. H. Cline, James Foster, Will Stroud, Tammy Doss, Jay Foster, Richard Koch, Alice Frick, E. Ralph Kiser, Emily Bowers, Lorine Peterson, Bill Sager, Barbara Blakeman, Mazie Crews, Donald Hess, Montana Houchins, Donna Wait, and Mary Spain.

Presentation of Additional Data

Scott Goodman shared with the Task Force that verbal permission had been granted for an extension on the Task Force's deadline to December 1, 2003. Written confirmation is expected soon.

Karen Trump reviewed the contents of the meeting packets with members and shared additional information that had been requested by members. Her comments are not summarized here since all members received written copies. The meeting packet contained the following items:

- The revised VSDB Consolidation Task Force Meeting Dates (relative to the change in the December 1 deadline to complete the Task Force's work)
- Summary of the July 31, 2003 Consolidation Task Force Meeting
- VSDB Consolidation Task Force, Focus Group Report – The Findings along with the PowerPoint slides used during the focus group findings
- Public Forum Summary relative to the Consolidation of Staunton and Hampton Schools for the Deaf and Blind, sponsored by the Hampton Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, held June 24, 2003
- Written comments, letters, and e-mails from the general public concerning the work of the Task Force (sent directly to Karen Trump or to the Web mailbox on DOE's website)
- Copy of the letter that is sent to parents/guardians from local school divisions relative to the services of the two schools as well as the services provided by the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired and the Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.
- Summary Sheet – Options Identified to Date and Other Issues (relative to the focus group report)

Glen Slonneger reviewed data that had been distributed to members prior to the meeting on post-secondary outcomes for students who are blind or visually impaired. Darlene White shared information relative to the Hampton students.

VSDB Consolidation Task Force Focus Group Report – The Findings

Judy Burtner presented the Focus Group Report Findings. A copy of her presentation was distributed to members so a summary of her comments is not included here.

The key findings were:

- Both schools should remain open.
- Residential program is important to the development of the total child.
- There is no support for elimination of high school functions and consolidation of the elementary students to one site.
- There is no support for the elimination of the program for blind/visually impaired and serving only hearing impaired students.
- Local schools are not currently prepared to receive students.
- There is a strong desire for a decision to be made and the issue laid to rest.

In the discussion that followed the focus group report presentation, Senator Maxwell questioned the Task Force's statement of purpose and asked specifically what was meant by the phrase, consolidation of services. It was agreed that while there was a not clear definition for consolidation of services in the appropriation language, there was an assumption that there would be no duplication of services by the two schools and that leaving both schools open with changes cited in the 1992 Legislation would be appropriate. It was reported that while both schools have worked to implement the intent of the 1992 legislation, some duplication still exists.

Criteria for Decision Making

The Task Force reviewed the criteria for decision-making that was identified and ranked at the July 31 meeting for the purpose of narrowing them to an appropriate number. They also reviewed additional criteria that had been suggested by the focus groups:

- Cost in the context of:
 - Student getting the best education in term of student outcomes
 - Good use of taxpayer fund and each student's access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)
 - Cost effectiveness
- Validate the authentic culture and language of the deaf child and support continuation
- No present services eliminated
- Consider where students live relative in a central location

Members narrowed the list of possibilities and agreed to the use of the following criteria:

- Option is in the best interest of the child, in use of best practices, both academically and socially. It includes the following components: educational mission, vocational training, a state of the art program, day and residential programs, comprehensive services from birth to age 21.
- Option covers the components of the appropriation language
- Option avoids duplication, working with one residential school instead of 2
- Option has the least negative impact on children and families
- Option is cost effective with program changes that reduces the cost ultimately with consideration given to the cost of facilities and their maintenance

Options to be Considered

Members reviewed the list of options developed at the June 3-4 meeting and using the above criteria agreed to remove the following options from the list:

1. Close both schools and move functions to regional and/or local school divisions
2. Close the high schools and consolidate the elementary schools to one location
3. Eliminate the element of blind, VI and serve only deaf and hard of hearing

4. Schools serve as technical education centers to local divisions with children returning to local school divisions

It was agreed the following options would be explored further:

1. Leave both schools open but with changes that may include downsizing, opening space for other entities, upgrading for certain other groups of students, etc.
2. Consolidate to one of the current facilities
3. Close both schools and relocate to another location

General Discussion by Task Force

Glen Slonneger indicated that the mission of both schools had been defined with two separate facilities serving two distinct populations. He raised the issue that if this was true, what did consolidation of services mean? Karen Trump indicated that there was still an overlap of services even though the intention was to have two separate schools. She stated there has been a move to eliminate the overlap but completion of the intent has not fully occurred.

Senator Maxwell asked what the Department of Education thought “consolidation of services” meant. The language of the appropriation act was reviewed. When the question was asked if consolidation could include one of the schools being a day program and the other a residential program, it was concluded that this would limit the day school to only serving those students in a small geographic location and be unfair to children residing in other parts of Virginia.

Mary-Margaret Cash asked that the Department of Education provide the Task Force with a “crystal ball” vision of what each option would look like and the cost it would take to implement it. Doug Cox indicated the Department could develop the information but would like some direction as to what changes to include in the first option of both schools remaining open. None were forthcoming

Senator Hanger asked what it meant when it was said that Virginia is not a parental choice state. Doug Cox stated this meant that parents could not select one of the schools and apply directly to send their child to the school. The parent has to work through the local school division and the child could not be sent without the local school’s approval. Senator Hanger asked the Department to find out if there are any other parental choice states. It was the opinion of some on the Task Force that maybe Florida allows parents to send their child to the school for the deaf and/or blind without going through the local school division.

Lisa Surber asked if there was a way to find out how many parents cannot get permission from the local school division to send their child to one of the two schools. Doug Cox indicated there was no available data that would provide this information. He stated the only data that is collected by the state is when a parent files a grievance.

David Young indicated that he had received a number of e-mails from military families across the country that indicated to him that they were not being transferred to Virginia because of a concern that the Hampton school may close. Members agreed they did see a need for clear admissions criteria for both schools. There was also agreement there needs to be a residential program available to all who need it. The question was asked of Doug Cox if there are states that are more parent-friendly. He indicated he would research the issue and report to the members his findings at the next meeting.

Darlene White was asked if the Hampton school had turned away students who may need a seven-day residential program instead of a five-day program. She stated she was aware of three cases in the past year, with one of these cases requesting a specialized weekend program. She further elaborated that in the past year's enrollment, there were approximately 60 –62 residential students and 15 –20 day students at the Hampton school.

David Young shared that his son was part of the residential program even though he lived relatively close to the school because the value of the dorm program far exceeded the benefits of the academic program. He elaborated the program provides his son with socialization from a peer group that includes multi-disabled children as well as deaf and/or blind students. He stated it is important to him that children from each of these disabilities remain at Hampton to give his son and other students peer group interaction experiences preventing isolation among the students.

Darlene White stated that the staff of the Hampton school looks for ways to plan joint activities with the Hampton Head Start program and Hampton school students. She stated there are currently Approximately 500 students without disabilities enrolled in other programs located at the Hampton school. Integrated activities not only strengthens not only the site program but also the Head Start and local school programs".

David challenged the Task Force to look at the Staunton campus in terms of its appropriateness as a campus for students with disabilities. He stated the maintenance/repairs needed on the structures alone would be cost prohibitive. He is also concerned about the location in relationship to the military families who need services. He asked Task Force members to reflect on the needs of child with disabilities as opposed to the building structures and the historical significance of the dated campus. He expressed his concern over which hospital would serve a child that experiences a seizure or other medical emergency while being transported long distances on the way home. He further stated Staunton is not wheelchair-friendly and its value as a historical facility does not justify further spending to keep it open as a facility for a disabled student. He also expressed his support for building a state of the art facility that is suitable for the students and their needs.

The discussion turned to other possible locations for a new facility. It was felt by some that a central location might be in the Richmond or Charlottesville area. Doug Cox reminded the members of information that he shared at the July 31 meeting that indicated that land is available at the Woodrow Wilson campus for a new facility. The question

was also asked if both schools could be closed, could land at the existing sites be used for new facilities? Nancy Armstrong stated there was additional land at the Staunton site that could be used as a building site. Doug Cox indicated he would do some additional work in searching for appropriate sites that may be available in the Richmond area.

Report Format

Karen Trump shared with the Task Force the required format for the report to the General Assembly. She stated members would need to identify what data are critical to be included in the report to document their work and ultimate conclusions.

Agenda Items for October 2 Meeting

Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind and Multi-Disabled – Hampton

9:30-4:00 p.m.

(Not necessarily in this order)

- Tour of School – 9:30 a.m.
- Task Force Convenes – 10:30 a.m.
- Introductory Comments and Introductions – Scott Goodman, Chair
- Public Comment
- Sharing of Additional Information Requested – Karen Trump
 - “Crystal ball” vision of what each of three options would look like and the cost of implementation of each (Requested by Mary-Margaret Cash)
 - States that are parental choice states and states that are more parent-friendly
 - Additional sites should both schools close
- Review of Operating Procedures relative to Decision-Making and Differences in Viewpoint, agreed to at June 3-4 meeting
- Discussion - Staunton and Hampton Schools relative to students, facilities, programs, enrollment, etc.
- Selection of an Option in the context of “best interest of the child” and the issue of “consolidation of services”
- Develop the response for the components (per appropriation language)
- Decision – Select data to include in the report

Prepared by Judy Burtner and Kathryn Burruss
8/29/03